

## University of Dundee

### EDUCING ART'S INDESCRIBABLE PRACTICE

Baldacchino, John

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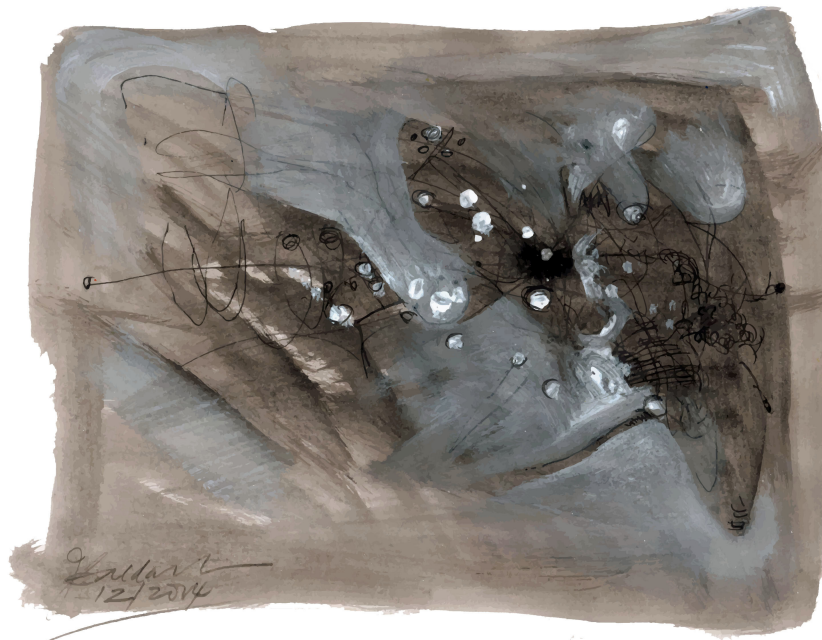
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## EDUCING ART'S INDESCRIBABLE PRACTICE

### Four theses on the impossibility of arts research

John Baldacchino

This short paper attempts to sketch four theses that emerge around the notion of art as an *indescribable practice*, particularly when this is located within the sphere of research.

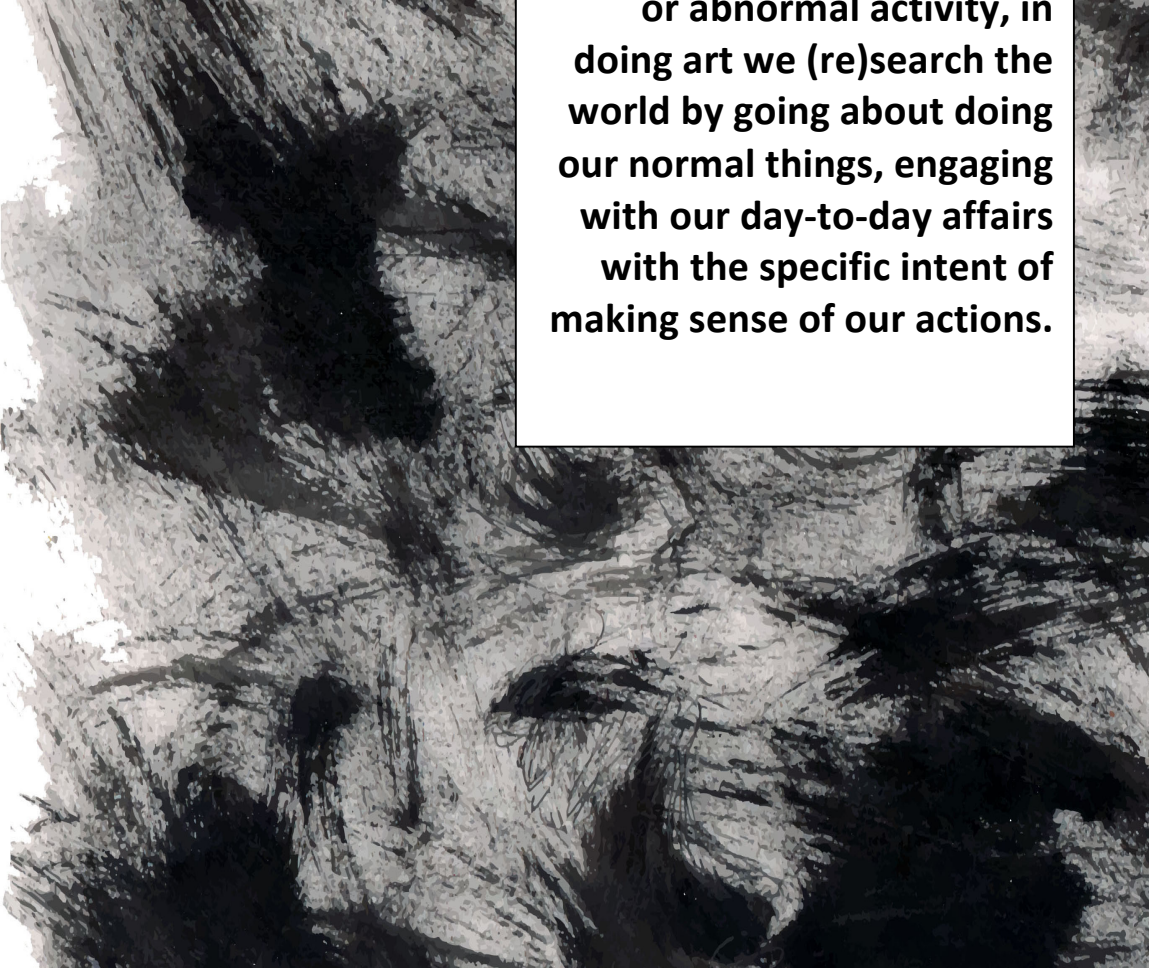
**IN ART THERE ARE NO PARTS** that “add up”. When we discuss art and its practice we speak of a narrative of intentions and objectives that we attribute to art according to the diverse interests with which we invest it.<sup>1</sup> These are not descriptions of art but of what *surrounds* and *contextualizes* art. So as we cannot reduce our account of art to one set of descriptions, the task becomes impossible because what we call “art” cannot be split up in constituent parts that are then

reassembled in the interests of a viable account.

**Any attempt to *describe art* is problematic because art can only be described by *what it is not*. While anything that we do could find a description in an account of its constituent parts, art's parts do not add up.**

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<sup>1</sup> See Benedetto Croce's *Breviario di estetica*, Adelphi, 1994.



**Far from engaging with an  
esoteric, spiritual, enigmatic,  
or abnormal activity, in  
doing art we (re)search the  
world by going about doing  
our normal things, engaging  
with our day-to-day affairs  
with the specific intent of  
making sense of our actions.**

**IF ART WERE TO BE SIMPLY DESCRIBED** as a series of intentions, actions, facts and outcomes, such descriptions would have to square with the paradox that is art. This paradox is mainly attributable to the act of doing art. This *doing* belongs to the agent of art (the artist) rather than the object of art (the artwork). However, to speak of the work of art as a *product* would be problematic because it falls between “the art that makes things” (*ars artefaciens*) and “the things which art makes” (*ars artefacta*).<sup>2</sup> Here, art researchers are caught in a tautology.

While acknowledging art’s impossible description, arts research must also recognise the necessity of such impossible descriptions. Arts research cannot be foreclosed by objectives that would externally impose on art a set of parts that art does not have. If a number of objectives were to be identified, they can only be viable if they were open ended and separate

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<sup>2</sup> See Etienne Gilson’s *The arts of the beautiful*. Dalkey Archive Press, 2000, 13.

**The accidental is inherently tautological. It is facilitated by how we work and live as individuals in forms of associated living while exercising our own free will and ways of interpreting the world through the diversity by which we exercise this free will.**

from art per se. If the objectives set for art are functional, positive or product-oriented, then the description of art becomes confused with a description of research that is conducted *on* art, but not *as* art. But as in arts research the point of departure is art itself, arts research can only sustain *art as research*. To be otherwise would trap art within the boundaries of a process that evades its product.

While recognising its self-imposed limitations, art must always remain ahead of the curve especially when it is regarded *as* research.<sup>3</sup>

**However, for art to move beyond its self-imposed limitations, rather than learn art’s practice we should be speaking of educating art’s “indescribable” practice as a form of *unlearning* the world by the ways of art as its own other – as non-art.**

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<sup>3</sup> See Graeme Sullivan’s *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the visual arts*. Sage, 2005; and Macleod and Holdridge’s *Thinking Through Art. Reflections on art as research*. Routledge, 2006.



**NON-ART** draws our attention to the context of the commonplace as that *everything* by which we embrace whatever we do in our everyday experiences. In this *everything* we approach art as a contingent state of affairs – that is, as a world of events that we cannot always control or plan because it is moved by a degree of accident, free will, and negotiation between the individuals that form the societies in which we belong.

So while as a society we always try to understand each other and work within rules upon which we agree, we also know that the permutations of our will and actions remain, to a degree, immediate. The only viable *exit* from this contradiction is to understand this relationship between immediacy and mediation through the spaces of autonomy that we provide for ourselves by making art.



To give further context **I PROPOSE  
FOUR THESES FOR DISCUSSION.**

These “theses” are linked to and proceed from each other. However they ultimately collapse back into each other as they are not strictly speaking a set of theses but four possible arguments that would help us exit the restrictive methodological and descriptive parameters by which art often finds itself walled within the constrained spaces of academic research.

When arts research is misinterpreted as a form of research on art, rather than a form of art as research, it risks becoming institutionalized. Nevertheless we cannot deny that within academia, arts research remains a strictly schooled affair. This admission is very important if we are talking about arts research within an educational context.

**I HAVE INTENTIONALLY CHOSEN** to cast these four theses in a tautological pattern. No matter what, it remains tautological to even attempt to speak of arts practice within and beyond the descriptions of research. This is because arts practice can only be **spoken with art** as its empirical other – that is, as an unnecessary form that is played, enacted, made, done, inhabited, uttered ... through the accidents of our everyday affairs.

Speaking with art takes at least three meanings: (i) to *speak* with art where one uses art as a mouthpiece/agency of ‘speaking’; (ii) to speak with *art* as one’s own interlocutor; and (iii) to speak *with* art as in the case of having art on one’s side as one’s neighbour, or one’s friend, or one’s companion, or lover, but also as one’s enemy, opponent, one’s threat.

This third meaning implies a further paradox because it suggests that art allows one to be *alongside* oneself in terms of being *other* than oneself.

**1. Art exits the realms of mediated form by making its own spaces of autonomy as a matter of everyday life.**

**2. Art’s autonomy makes no case for art’s sake, but it asserts art’s ways of knowing as a practice of unlearning and therefore as art’s other, which is non-art.**

**3. As non-art, art is a practice that continuously affirms its indescribability.**

**4. Art’s indescribability is practiced as arts research.**

**TO SPEAK OF AN ACT THAT ULTIMATELY RESISTS THE LINGUISTIC SPHERE** is to recognise the primacy of art's paradox, its contradictions. These contradictions create a *dialectical* and a *dialectal* horizon on which I would propose to expand my four theses. Art's speak is therefore a *manner* of speaking – a *dialect*; and a *logic* sustained by contradictions – a *dialectic*.



**Art exits the realms of mediated form by making its own spaces of autonomy as a matter of everyday life.**

Art is what we do. Some would claim that its autonomy reflects our ways of making sense of the world beyond the strictures of truth, beauty and goodness. Others would object and claim that on the contrary, art is the very act by which we give shape, form and meaning to a true, good and beautiful world. But the history of art gives us a very different scenario. What we do and make as art falls beyond both ends of this spectrum. While we make art in order to mediate the world, this also opens up avenues for our understanding by which we exit the same mediated realms that we create for ourselves.<sup>4</sup> This happens through what Georg Lukács calls art's *speciality*.<sup>5</sup> While at first speciality might suggest a somewhat elitist deed, to claim art as *special* we must begin with the manner by which art emerges from the immediate whereabouts of our everyday life. In this respect, art is special because it is an integral part of what we do and how we live. We can only move beyond the mediated meanings that we claim in "speaking with art" because the *speaking* that we do is neither rarefied nor alien to what we do every day.



**Art's autonomy makes no case for art's sake, but it asserts art as a practice of unlearning and therefore as art's other, which is non-art.**

So while some would object to the notion of autonomous art as an elitist claim that few would understand or engage with, the case is the very opposite. Human beings gain autonomy by how their art claims its place in every day life. The difficulty and suspicion of elitism or incomprehension – by which art has been dismissed throughout history – comes from how the

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<sup>4</sup> I discuss this notion of *exiting* in John Baldacchino, *Art's Way Out. Exit Pedagogy and the Cultural Condition*. Sense 2012.

<sup>5</sup> See Georg Lukács's *Estetica*, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, 1975.

interpretation of art is reified by those political, economic, scientific, and cultural expectations by which the world is still regarded as an assemblage of constituent parts. This rational Newtonian approach was indispensable to liberate our understanding of nature and the world from mythology and superstition. However with Einstein and quantum physics, Newtonian rationalism has become untenable. We have come to realise what art has always revealed: that anything we do or to which we belong is not an a priori construct of an already given spatiotemporal constituency.

Thus our understanding of art's autonomy must be distanced from the romantic assumptions of art's self-evidence. As arts practitioners (and we must always bear in mind that art is made by both the artist and its audiences), our engagement with art returns to the "hatred" by which the art practitioner develops a genuine relation with it. As Adorno reminds us, the artist "himself vanishes" because "art is not an object." He further explains that while it is almost always assumed that "no one would devote himself to art without – as the bourgeois put it – getting something out of it (...) this is not true in the sense that a balance sheet could be drawn up (...) even though such feeble-mindedness has by now established itself as common sense."<sup>6</sup>

Contrary to bourgeois expectations, when we make art we unlearn the feeble-mindedness by which the logic of the balance sheet becomes common sense. To that effect we unlearn art itself by detaching it from the reification by which it often becomes an object and by which it is sold as a commodity.

By unlearning art, it becomes non-art and therefore commonplace. As non-art, art is often misinterpreted as an elitist act. Yet not without irony, when by its speciality art reveals our daily living, it is quickly denounced as being nonsense.



**As non-art, art is a practice that continuously affirms its indescribability.**

If non-art is immediate to our everyday life, how does one square its speciality with the descriptions by which everyday life is learnt as a sum of its parts? The simple answer is that everyday life does not "add up" – which is why art finds everyday life its other, as non-art.

More importantly, in our attempt to unlearn our self-imposed Newtonian certainties, we return on those horizons where we could neither possess nor commodify what we claim to know or learn. Instead, we recognise how in its speciality of everydayness art practice refuses to describe itself or anything else.

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<sup>6</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London: Athlone 1999, 13.



To engage with the world as a form of art practice is to understand and articulate *what-something-is* through *what-something-is-not*.

Art practice is an experience marked by anticipation where limits are turned into avenues of possibility. If for a second we really assume that the imagination is the realm of the possible, then this could only come about by looking for what is not known to exist. If we were to know what and where something is likely to be, then there is nothing to find.

In claiming its indescribability, art does not seek to identify a goal. As art practitioners we seek to unlearn what is already identified. This is no different from how in our daily living we turn mere experience into something that makes sense to us. We continuously unlearn what is known and we always seek to imagine what is not yet known.



### **Art's indescribability is practiced as arts research.**

From this position of impossibility, arts research begins to generate its own routes and it seeks to *find* through *making* and *doing*. This gives a different meaning to thinking as a form of *gathering*. Here *cognition* is removed from the strictures of preordained development and reveals knowledge as an act of making.<sup>7</sup>

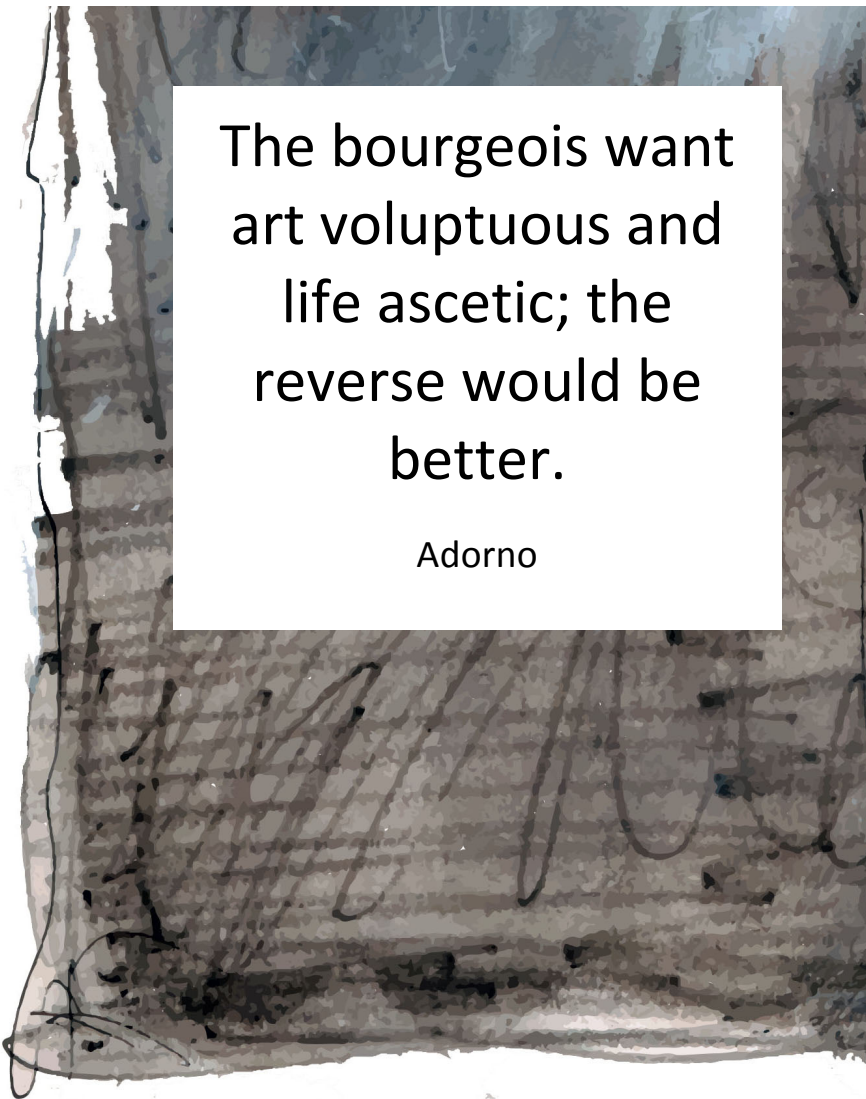
Far from giving us any constructivist comfort by which many educationalists and social scientists regard the arts as a vehicle of knowing and learning; arts research confirms that the direction it *finds* could never offer a blueprint or scheme on which one would draw a transactional form of knowledge that balances our yields.

Art's pedagogical immanence is manifested by how it reveals the contingency of every day life. Here art's indescribable practice urges us to move away from the desired results by which it is often measured in schools, museums, theatres, or even the square.

In the anticipatory experiences by which art practice refuses to find a form of measure or a viable description, its claim to *research* is continuously moved by a desire to break out of the logic of the balance sheet. Failing to see this paradox would leave art chained to the bloated and voluptuous obligations by which it is often described and thereby used.

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<sup>7</sup> See Giambattista Vico's *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988, 45-47.

An abstract artwork featuring a white rectangular text box centered on a dark, textured background. The background consists of dark, swirling, and scribbled lines, possibly made with charcoal or dark paint, creating a sense of movement and depth. The white box is clean and minimalist, providing a stark contrast to the dark, expressive background.

The bourgeois want  
art voluptuous and  
life ascetic; the  
reverse would be  
better.

Adorno

**John Baldacchino** holds a Professorial Chair of Arts Education at the University of Dundee. He taught at the universities of Warwick, Robert Gordon (Gray's School of Art), Columbia University (Teachers College), and Falmouth University. His work focuses on the intersections that occur between the arts, philosophy and education. Published widely through many papers and chapters, he is the author of *Post-Marxist Marxism* (1996), *Easels of Utopia* (1998), *Avant-Nostalgia* (2002); *Education Beyond Education* (2009); *Makings of the Sea* (2010); *Art's Way Out* (2012), *Mediterranean Art Education* (with Raphael Vella, 2013), *Democracy Without Confession* (with Kenneth Wain, 2013), *John Dewey* (2013), and *My Teaching, My Philosophy: Kenneth Wain* (with Simone Galea and Duncan Mercieca, 2014). He is currently writing two further books, on *Giambattista Vico* and on *Ivan Illich*, while working on his second volume on *Mediterranean Aesthetics*.

More details about his written work and his art are found on his website:  
[www.johnbaldacchino.com](http://www.johnbaldacchino.com)

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